

There are actions of a weak nature which spark transformations and profound changes in the architectural project or in the city. These actions can occur or arise spontaneously, sometimes leaving only a fleeting trace, or they can even be invisible, without a physical presence. At the same time, they can generate links, connections, or drifts that humanise, transform and enrich the city and make it more inhabitable. This research focuses on those kinds of actions, which began appearing in the mid-20th century.

The city is not only the physical and palpable product of planning and large-scale infrastructures, despite the undeniable importance of both those things. This dissertation aims to uncover other possible, more contemporary forms of the 'urban' through the attentive observation of artists, thinkers, and architects as noteworthy seismographers of change.

This is a study of ideas about openness and new ways of using space: those which can coexist with uncertainty, instability, or indeterminacy, and thereby distance themselves from the imposition of hard and hierarchical structures. These methods reveal a way of being, or of dealing with issues that affect us all in the present day. They also inform the way we approach contemporary architectural design and urban planning in general.

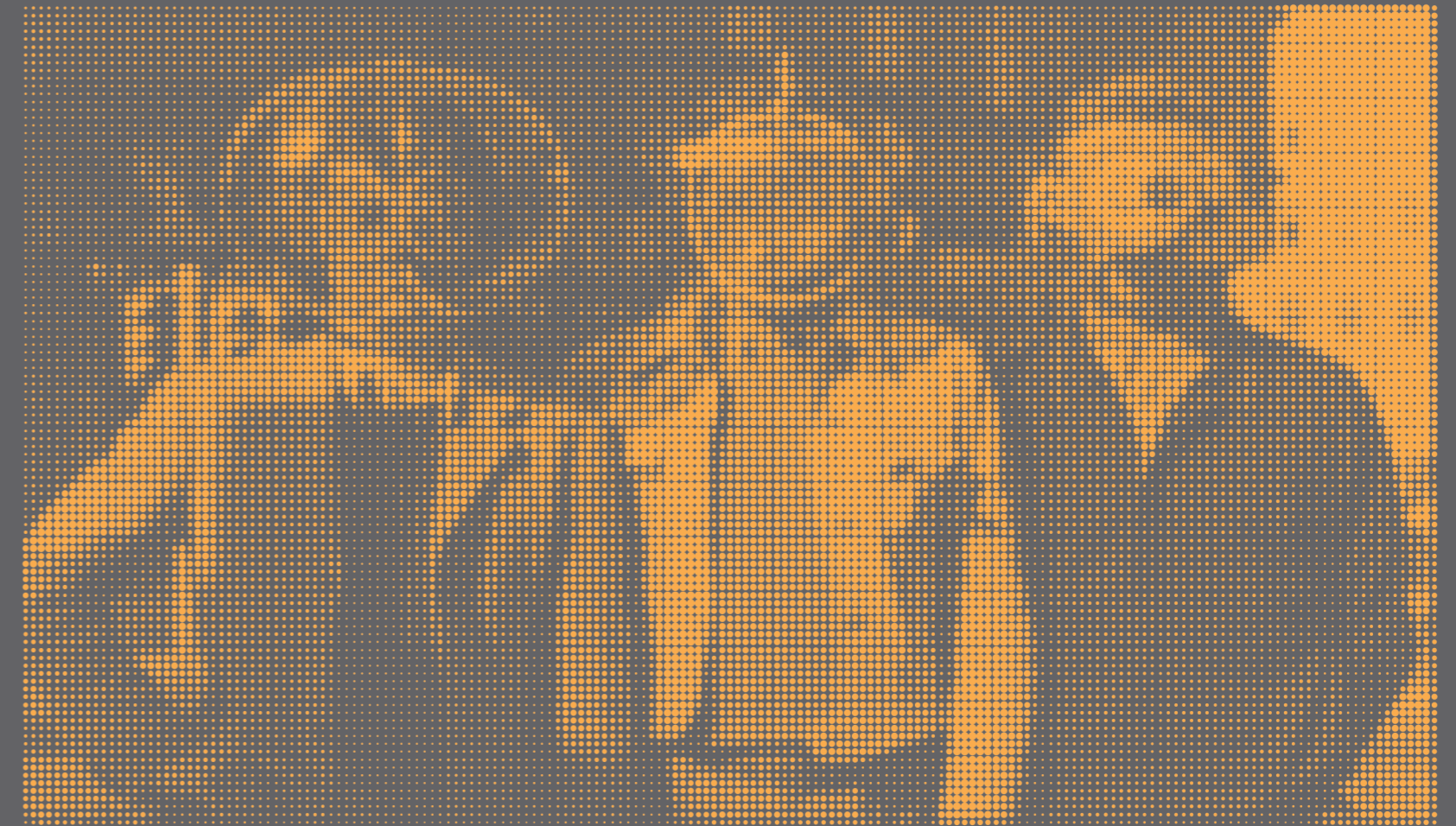
This research is framed by the time period of the 1960s and 70s. It is a study of weak actions in art and architecture such as the event, the ephemeral, the journey, the negation of the discipline, and even aspects which have less presence, such as fragility, discontinuity, disappearance, and indeterminacy. Actions like these, by touching on the subtlety of the *infra-thin*, manage to make visible the '*je ne sais quoi*'.

Evelyn Alonso Rohner



arquia / tesis 45 (EN)

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INFRA-THIN ACTIONS
Indeterminacy, discontinuity
and entropy

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FOREWORD

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

Carmen Espejel Alonso

Approaching an analysis of the ‘infrathin’ in an urban and architectural context requires a heavy dose of courage and, at the same time, a sense of vertigo in offering a response to intangible, incorporeal questions, that can result in vague statements. To overcome that ambiguity and capture the essence of the relationship between how the city is used and how space is perceived and produced, Evelyn Alonso posits the infrathin as an unknown – a question that is not at all easy to unravel, since it involves analysing the hidden forces that hold together and coalesce our urban society. Reading this book opens the door to an immaterial, yet not unreal, universe of weak actions, whose faint impact leaves but a fleeting and enigmatic trace, often the spontaneous result of the lives of the inhabitants.

The narrative it offers is almost a map of weak phenomena, drawing on authors immersed in 1960s counterculture. Artistic and architectural movements, crossing the boundaries of disciplines, give rise to a critical attitude with respect to the inherited modern city, befuddled by rational rules that cut off the greatest achievement of urban reality: its social aspect. The *inframince*, a neologism coined by Marcel Duchamp, emerges as a multi-dimensional intuition into the immaterial mechanisms of constraint and attachment that simultaneously merge with an action that breaks down boundaries and blurs limits. During that period of rebuffing conventional values, methods were devised to unravel those invisible nets, especially through artistic practices based on performance and happenings, in which users played a major part. In her meticulous and acute dissection, drawing on theoreticians, artists

and architects, Evelyn Alonso uncovers vestiges that broaden our perception and let us infer what we can detect but can’t quite comprehend: the influence of infrathin processes on the construction of the city

I’d like to highlight the great polyphonic efforts behind the constellation of cases hunted down by the author. Although they do not offer a direct answer, they do immerse us in the exception, so we can tie together all the examples and thus elucidate what we are intended to grasp from these pages: *infra-thin actions*. That said, the text is also an in-depth investigation of concepts that intertwine the *weak* on a subliminal level. For example, Henri Lefebvre’s transduction and experimental utopia are complemented by Jean Baudrillard’s idea of action as a determining factor in architecture, by Paul Virilio’s trajectile space, and the visualisation of movement outlined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their distinction between maps and tracings. Moreover, the death of the author, posited by Roland Barthes, can be associated with José Ángel Valente’s idea of “impresence”, whereas Guy Debord’s theory of the *dérive*, or drift, reverberates with the rhetoric of walking or the grammar of silence outlined by Michel de Certeau, or Claude Parent’s space-time notations. On the other hand, form becomes obsolete in Robert M. Rubin’s notion of the “unhouse”, and architecture is defined by a climate-controlled environment according to Reyner Banham. We should add the doctrine of Non-Plan and Jane Jacobs, who proposed the self-management of urban spaces, and even Diana Agrest, who extrapolated the term into Non-Design.

Similar perspectives can also be found more recently, in Richard Sennet's polarity between the open city and the closed city, or the anthropological research directed by Nicolas Bourriaud.

Reviewing the seminal work by Marcel Duchamp, Vito Acconci's unsettling drifts, the movement-related notations, or "motations", by Lawrence and Anna Halprin —closely related to Rosemarie Castoro's dynamic mapping—, and Hans Haacke's reflections on private property, or analysing Constant Nieuwenhuys' psychogeographic maps uncovers previously unknown urban limits that are revealed to us through experimentation. On the other hand, when Sol LeWitt's intervals echo with Yoko Ono's fusion of language and action, with Marina Abramović and Ulay's examination of the boundaries of intimacy, or when we consider the reactions elicited by Adrian Piper's urban performances, it all pushes us to explore space in its connection with emotion and privacy.

During that period of creative frenzy, guidelines were laid out for broadening a strictly regulated culture, so that people could rediscover the spontaneity of everyday public spaces. That is how we interpret Gordon Matta-Clark's segmented enclosures, Trisha Brown's kinetic diagrams in marginal urban settings, the performative activism of Fluxus, or Ugo La Pietra's "disequilibrating system". Likewise, in a context closer to nature, there is Dennis Oppenheim's perception of the body subject to extremes, or the link between time and uncertainty explored by Robert Smithson, or even Robert Barry's unusual *Inert Gas*

Series, in which he investigated how to dematerialise a work of art.

Architecture offers a significant array of designers with a certain common genealogy, albeit with different perspectives. Arata Isozaki and Richard Buckminster Fuller both understand the metropolis not just as an ensemble of building material, but also of abstract ideas inscribed in a civilisation, and, as such, opposed to their destruction. N. John Habraken, with his theory of supports, interprets it as a shared rather than individual construction, which relates it to the free and open configurations, catalysers of creative processes, designed by Cedric Price. Kenzo Tange, Jo van den Broek and Jaap Bakema, or the Florentine, Gianni Pettienna, formulate a city of fuzzy limits and unbounded growth in their radical critique of society. On the other hand, Aldo van Eyck analyses the interstitial space of thresholds and borders, whereas Alison and Peter Smithson or the group Haus-Rucker-Co study the technology of habitable environments.

Hans Hollein worked on the sphere of privacy, although Candilis-Josic-Woods engaged in more in-depth investigations regarding ensembles of indeterminate non-hierarchical collective flows. Ewald Bubner delved into the dynamics of adaptable architecture, while Frei Otto defended free interactions under the expansive roofs of tensile structures. Along similar lines, Bernard Tschumi argued that architecture is an environment that generates events, and Archigram posited a city like a nerve centre of portable nomadisms. Moshe Safdie studies the dissolution of limits through a multiple and open aggregation,

with his vertically stacked dwellings following an additive principle. Finally, designs rooted in an infinite capacity for expansion were probed by Archizoom and Yona Friedman. They subvert, and shatter, practices of architecture and urban planning stifled by strict orthodoxy. Today, we are delighted by the discovery of the latent energy that the infrathin offers to urban theory. Rigid or closed systems do not foster the incorporation of spaces of negotiation; however, once a system has been opened up, a fascinating complex of collective possibilities emerges.

In conclusion, I would like to forewarn you that this book draws you in, captivates you and forces you

to keep reading. First, through the satisfying feeling of moving through an intuited territory that is difficult to pin down. Second, through a rising energy in the face of the broad range of intersecting connections uncovered in the field under study. And, finally, through the revelation of an ethereal, but true, reality. Thus, this profusion of ideas throughout the book lets us decipher the urban processes in a more intuitive and inventive way; we each unravel our own golden thread as we move through the labyrinth to find our own treasures and avoid possible traps or minotaurs. I invite readers to discover for themselves the keys to navigating a city subject to constant change and adaptation.

INTRODUCTION

Arata Isozaki.
Incubation Process/Joint Core System, 1962.
Work on Paper: 20×13.5cm.

*I have precisely chosen to use the word “thin” which is an emotional and human term and not a precise laboratory measurement. The sound or the music made by corduroy pants rubbing as you walk is related to the concept of infra-thin. The gap between the two sides of a sheet of paper... To be studied!... This topic has preoccupied me for the past ten years. I believe that through the infra-thin it is possible to move from the second to the third dimension.*¹

The strength of some plants is always surprising. Edelweiss, for example, manages to protrude out of tiny cracks in the Alpine rocks. Plants’ resilience often derives from the most astounding strategies: parasitism and symbiosis, organisation, lightness of structure... and in some cases, even nomadism. Edelweiss does not have the hardness of the surrounding rocks, but it has the fleeting energy to defy its hostile environment. Edelweiss is visited yearly. People come to admire its fragility, ephemerality, remoteness, and protection; not because of its beauty—surely there are more beautiful flowers in the traditional sense—and neither because of its renowned healing qualities. To the wanderer in the Alps, nothing can be more pleasurable than the discovery of an edelweiss flower in the middle of a rocky landscape, precisely because it has become an event in itself.

Not unlike plants, cities rely on various mechanisms to maintain their resilience. They cope with extreme situations, devastation, callous or inhumane urbanism, and all sorts of other external stresses. Nevertheless, there is always something

that binds them, like a string structure or an invisible thread that elastically keeps them together.

As Arata Isozaki explained in 1962, cities are abstract ideas. The substance of a city cannot be shattered by the “destruction of cities, but by the eclipse of civilization”²

Even in the city’s apparent complexity and fragmentation, one can perceive structures, forces or energies which suggest or expose its fading identity. It is the inevitable entropic process of any city, retained by the weak yet powerful structures that give it its cohesion. What biology, or in general any science, has obstinately taught us is that complex things are, in truth, quite simple. With careful observation, one starts to recognise hidden patterns even amid apparent disorder or fragmentation.

A city is not just the palpable product of urban planning or of large infrastructures—which is not to disregard the importance of both! Many of the qualities that make cities liveable are more often found in events and ‘weak actions’. Some are spontaneous by-products of the inhabitants themselves and generally leave only an ephemeral trace; others harden, solidify, and become structures that manage to humanise, enrich and make our cities more habitable. Finally, there are qualities that, though invisible, formless and without mass, can radically transform urban life.

In this chain of actions that intervene in urban life and transform the city, the ‘weakest’ of them, those that are almost ‘impresent’,³ the invisible and incorporeal, are the ones that have the potential to

1. Jean Clair: *Duchamp et la photographie*, p. 96.

2. Arata Isozaki: *Unbuilt*. Hankenchikushi, p. 23.

3. This term will be explained later in this research. The term was coined by José Angel Valente and translated by the author of this book.



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Evelyn's professional career in architecture began in 2001, when she opened her first office. Since then, she has completed many successful competition entries, and her accomplishments include winning the Gold Medal in the Miami Beach Biennial, the Bering Strait International Competition, the refurbishment of the *Basílica de Nuestra Merced* (by Oíza and Gutiérrez 1949), and *San Ginés*, where she explored trans-disciplinary work in the context of urban space. In 2011, she co-founded *Alonso + Sosa architects*.

She teaches part time at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and has been invited to serve as a guest critic at Harvard GSD, the European University and KIT (Karlsruher Institute für Technologie). She has given lectures at the University of Genova, Miami University, and the Polytechnic of Madrid, among others, and has been a jury member for awards and competitions such as the *Oraa Prize*.

Her work and articles have appeared in many publications, including *Future Arquitecturas*, *Arquitectura Viva*, *Palimpsesto*, *Rita* (by Redfundamentos), *ESTOA*, and in compilations such as those published by Silvana Editoriale and Tirant Lo Blanch.

Alonso Rohner's work has been exhibited around the world from Seoul to Canada, and she has recently finished a piece, *Transferencias Iberoamericanas*, for the BIAU XI (Ibero-American Biennial of Architecture and Urbanism) in Asunción, Paraguay.

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